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A message from ex-spies: spying is good

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LANDGROVE, Vt. - It was the first meeting of former spies who stayed north.

One by one, the ex-spies, most of them middle-aged, sober-looking men, drove down a dirt road and checked into the Village Inn. First was the ex-CIA lawyer, then the Boston welfare investigator, the Connecticut grandmother and the Vermont preacher.

Ten years after the National Assn. of Former Intelligence Officers was formed to promote better understanding of the role of spies, New England yesterday got its first chapter.

Most spies, it seems, like to retire to Texas, California and Florida. In a word, places that are warm.

"Like most people, intelligence officers like to retire to sun and sand," said James Bamford, an author who lectured the group about the National Security Agency that tried unsuccessfully to suppress his book, "The Puzzle Palace."

But Michael Speers, a Vermont resident who worked for the foreign service and allows as how he once had a run-in with the KGB, thought he could get together a dozen ex-agents.

Fifty showed up.

The one-time code-breakers and cryptologists had a mission yesterday: to tell the public that spies are neither bad nor Bond; that the CIA and National Security Agency are necessary in the United States.

James Shell calls himself a paper-pushing Massachusetts bureaucrat in charge of welfare investigations. But he had another life.

Shell grew up in Boston, had no idea what he wanted to do and went into the military. He thought maybe he would teach English at a Boston high school and coach a football team.

Shell wound up in a classroom for a year. The teacher was a Ukrainian woman, square-faced,

Asian-looking. Shell learned Russian in a year. He spent the next 25 years in Europe, from Italy to Germany. He describes his work only as "analysis."

"Everyone has the image of James Bond," Shell said over a dinner of filet of sole. "You know: the tuxedo, all the chicks around, the baccarat and champagne. Fantasy-land, that's what that is."

Shell sipped his J&B on the rocks and continued: "I eventually decided I wanted to get out in 1973. I wanted my kids to graduate from a high school in a country that would still be in existence when they wanted to go back to their alma mater."

So Shell moved to Winthrop, bought a big Pontiac and moved into a four-bedroom home next door to a McDonald's. "I really got into the American way of life," he said.

Jeffrey Kingry is a Vermont minister. He sees no conflict between preaching and his former life: he worked for a company under contract to the government that compiled intelligence on future weapons systems. His desk was in a vault in order to ensure security.

"By religious conviction, I'm a pacifist," Kingry said. "There are some people here who are a little right of Attila the Hun. But we all have something in common: we all believe that a strong intelligence community is needed. Some people ask me if there isn't a conflict in being an idealistic minister and being a member of an intelligence organization. My feeling is that intelligence prevents wars. So I don't see any conflict."

To her friends in Dartmouth, Conn., Eleanore Hoar is a grandmother of four, a teacher in the state school system, a trim woman who describes her age as "in the 60s."

"If I told my friends I had been in the CIA, there would just be dead silence," said Hoar, who worked as a CIA agent in Hong Kong during the 1950s. "So I don't usually say anything about it. Most of my friends really don't know."

But after 25 years of silence on the subject she told her friends where she was going this weekend, and she spoke out on the need for continued intelligence work.

"This is such the opposite of signing all those forms saying you won't talk about what you did," she said. Then she quickly added she would divulge no secrets.

Irony at the spy conference: the executive director of the national association is James Greaney, a former lawyer for the CIA who fought the publication of a celebrated book critical of the agency called "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence," by Victor Marchetti and John Marks.

The speaker at the conference was Bamford, the Natick author whose book about the National Security Agency was unsuccessfully fought by the agency. The theme of Bamford's book is that the agency, which breaks codes and intercepts communications, is five times bigger than the CIA and is America's most secret agency.

Said Greaney: "To be honest, I haven't read his book."